



# Narmada

A pictorial journey down the river

**Photographs by Parthiv Shah**

**Text by Vidya Shah**

## For Anant and Antara

*Cover : Bheda Ghat, Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh  
Back Cover : Bharuch, Gujarat, where the river meets the sea*

**‘Narmada - A pictorial journey down the river’** by Vidya Shah  
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*Amarkantak,  
the origin of the river Narmada*







When we were children, about nine and five years of age, my brother Aadi and I used to sometimes play the 'name' game where we would name colours, animals, fruits, birds, rivers and lots of other things. It was fun because I knew the names of many more things than Aadi. Ma would feel relieved that we were taking care of each other and not pestering her!

Once Daadi had come down from Ahmedabad and we were playing names of rivers. She always had many interesting stories to tell, so we would always include her in our game. During the river game, I said Narmada and Daadi's face lit up instantly. I guessed there was a story there.

"Daadi kya hua? You thought of something?"

"You know Avni," she said to me, "when I used to bathe my children, your Baba and Kaka, I used to sing a little river chant when the last portion of water was being emptied. I suddenly remembered that song."

"Sing it for us please Daadi," Aadi spoke up.



*Pathrad, Madhya Pradesh, where the Maheshwar dam is located*





Daadi's deep and joyful voice soared,

"Gange cha! Yamune chiava! Godavari! Sarasvati!  
Narmade! Sindhu! Kaveri! Jale asmin sannidhim  
kuru!

This means that in this water, I invoke the presence  
of holy waters from the rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati,  
Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri!

Do you know that the Narmada is a very important river in our culture?  
My father also named me Narmada!"

"But Daadi, we thought your name was Virbala!" said Aadi.

"Yes, that is how most people know me, but in those days it was  
not uncommon to have more than one name. My father named me  
Narmada because the river meant a lot to our family of farmers. And  
of course, I was his favourite so he gave me this special name! The  
Narmada has another name as well, she is also called Reva," said  
Daadi with a special smile.



*Earthen pots drying in the sun, Chandod Karnali, Gujarat*



Food varieties cultivated in  
the tribal belt along the river  
include: juvar, bajra, chana  
and oilseeds like groundnut,  
castor, sesame and coarse  
millets like kulthia

*Domkhedi, now submerged under water following the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam*







"Daadi have you seen this river?" I asked, beginning to enjoy the discussion.

"Oh Avni, I have spent so much of my childhood by the river. When I was a little girl like you, I used to jump into the river and swim like a fish! Most children who live along the river learn to swim very well from an early age. I remember even recently when I went to the village about two years ago, children like you were swimming, collecting crabs and beautiful stones."

"Wow! That must be so exciting, Daadi. Why is the Narmada so special, tell us please!" Aadi exclaimed.

"I can share a few things with you about the river on one condition. You should ask your Baba and Amma to take you to the place where the river flows, and they should tell you things that they know about the river as well. You will learn why rivers mean so much to us. Agreed?" said Daadi stroking his hair.

"Sure Daadi," we said in unison.

*Open kiln used by potters along the banks of the Narmada*



*Bharuch, Gujarat, where the river meets the sea*



*Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh*

“For many people, the river is like their temple and the water is their God. In fact in the sacred Puranas of the Hindus, it is said that while you attain salvation by bathing in the Ganga, you attain it by merely seeing the Narmada. Sage Agastya called the river ‘Narma- Da’ — the Endower of Bliss. There is a Narmada Purana where you will find stories about the river and its mythic creation. All along the river, there are temples, samadhis and dargahs. There are beautiful temples in Shoolpaneshwar, Maheshwar, Omkareshwar where people mostly worship Shiva or Mahadev, the Greatest of Gods.

In ancient times, kings used to build ghats as a mark of respect to the river. The architecture was absolutely beautiful. You can still see it in places like Maheshwar, where the Holkar dynasty celebrated the greatness of the river by building beautiful temples on its banks.

*Maheshwar Ghat, Madhya Pradesh. A flight of 123 steps leads down to the river*









*Jabalpur Ghat, a popular pilgrimage site*



*Devotees and their Gods.*

The Narmada is an important pilgrimage site. One of the highest acts a pilgrim can perform, is to walk from the sea to the source of the river, in Amarkantak, and back along the opposite bank. This is called a Parikrama."

'People walk more than 300 kilometers to pay their respects to the river! Now let's see, my school is 8 kilometers from where we live and it takes me 20 minutes on my school bus. Wow! I wonder how long it takes for them to complete this journey on foot,' I thought wonderingly.

"This journey can take up to two years to complete," said Daadi.

"Wow, long holidays! I wonder what they do about school and work," said Aadi with a look of longing on his face.

*Omkareshwar in Madhya Pradesh is famous for its Shiva temple*







*Murals in a temple at Chandod Karnali, Gujarat. Chandod Karnali is considered to be extremely holy, for the three rivers – Narmada, Orsang and Gupt Saraswati meet here*

“Who are the people who perform the Parikrama?” I asked.

“All sorts of people,” said Daadi. “People who enjoy being with nature, who respect nature, and like to spend time by themselves and like the quiet. While quite a few are sadhus, sadhavis and ascetics, you’ll be surprised to know there are many people like your Amma and Baba, teachers and doctors, people young and old. The sadhus in particular, interact closely with the people who live along the river. They carry some flour and usually a tawa to make rotis. Wherever they stop, they kindle a little fire and make their rotis. Sometimes the villagers also give them dal and vegetables.”





*Devotees doing Parikrama along the banks of the Narmada*









"Where does the river begin and where does it end?" What a surprise, a good question from Aadi!

"The way the Narmada flows is quite interesting. It is different from other rivers in our country. There are only three rivers that flow from the east to the west and Narmada is one of them. It originates in Amarkantak in Madhya Pradesh and flows into the Arabian Sea in Bharuch in Gujarat."

The other two rivers that flow from east to the west are Mahi and Tapti

*Temple tank at Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh*

*Bharuch, Gujarat*







"So that means it is really very long? It flows through the two states of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat?" I pondered over what Daadi had said.

"Ok, I will list out the names of a few places where the river flows. Let me see if you can name the states where it flows."

Amarkantak  
Mandla hills  
Satpura  
Arabian Sea  
Narmada valley  
Vindhya  
Gulf of Khambat  
Jabalpur and  
Bharuch

"Geography is not my strong point but I'll try!  
Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat?"  
I took a guess.



Folk song from the Nimaad region

*Maa Rewa Thaaro Paani Nirmal Khal Khal Behta Jaaye  
Aso Ved Purana Bataaye re...*

*Gaanv, Gaanv Kaa Sab Nar-Naari Parikamma kare  
pag-pag-thaari*

*Gaanv Gaanv Mey Hare Narbada*

*Jay Jagadamba Maay Re....*

O Mother Rewa! Your water pure gushes down,  
So the Vedas and Puranas tell us...

At every step, men and women from villages far and  
near, do the Parikrama

In every village, they sing your praises, O Narmada!

Mother Jagadamba! May you reign supreme...



*Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh*



*A canal under construction in Gujarat*

"Fantastic! You got it right Avni," said Daadi. "If you think of the map of India as a person, then it flows across the stomach of India. It originates in Amarkantak in the Maikal Ranges of Madhya Pradesh and empties into the Arabian Sea in the Bharuch district of Gujarat. It rises on the summit of the hill, and for the first 300 kilometres of its course, winds among the Mandla Hills, which form the head of the Satpura Range. Then at Jabalpur, passing through the 'Marble Rocks', it enters the Narmada Valley between the Vindhya and Satpura ranges, and pursues a direct westerly course to the Gulf of Khambat. So in a sense, it is the lifeline of central India from times immemorial." Daadi's knowledge of the river really impressed me, more so her strong memory at the age of 69.

*On the way to Chandod, Gujarat.*











The Bhagoria literally means elopement. It is the most exciting and colourful event before Holi, a place where young tribal girls and boys come dressed up to meet, sing and dance together



"And Daadi people live along the entire river? It must be very different from living in a city, isn't it?" I wanted to know more.

"Not only that, different people co-exist differently with the river and its adjoining forests," said Daadi. "Different kinds of settlements have existed along the rivers for centuries. There are tribal communities like the Baiga, Gond, Rathwa, Bhils and Bhilalas. Most of these communities have remained largely cut off from the outside world. For example, after the Badwani plains, the valley becomes narrow with a continuous stretch inhabited by the Bhil and Bhilala communities who have lived there for centuries. You'll see small clusters of huts on both sides of the river. These communities are very poor and their lives in these remote areas are very different from the lives of city dwellers.



The Bhils played an important role in the 1857 mutiny. A well known Bhil leader was Khajya Naik who along with his 4000 followers joined Tatya Tope against the British in 1857.



They have their own culture, social norms, languages, myths, music and stories. For example, the Gayana is a very important musical ritual that celebrates the relationship between nature, people and their dependence on God. Through the music and the lyrics, they reach out to God.

Living close to the river, the people use the water for drinking, for bathing, for their cattle, almost throughout the year, except during the rainy season. During the summer, they also go fishing in the river as there are many varieties of fish,” explained Daadi patiently.

Aadi was also listening very keenly. He said dreamily, “So they must be kindling their little fire to cook the fish?”

“Yes, you can see beautiful boats with sails and the boatmen rowing away towards the middle of the river and spreading out big hand-made fishing nets,” said Daadi smiling.













*Fishing in the river*

There is an amazing variety of vegetation along the Narmada including economically useful species like the tendu, mahua, teak and bamboo



“It looks very pretty, but it is also very difficult to live in such conditions. If you live on a hill, even if it is by the river, you have to climb up and down several times a day just to fetch water for drinking and cooking. There are no taps and showers there.” said Daadi.

“You know, it is as if the people have a close bond with nature...the rivers, surrounding valleys and forests and the people all come to live together in a harmony. Along the Narmada, there are many varieties of trees. The forest is the source of fodder, fuel, fibre, fruits, timber, medicines and many other things.” I could see that Daadi was trying to tell us to value and respect the things we have.

*Women carrying freshly-made pots for sale in Badwani, Madhya Pradesh*



“What do the children do, Daadi? Do they go to schools and study?” I asked quickly to change her mood.

But she continued pensively. “Of course, there are schools in the villages. They are not like the ones you go to. Teachers come in from the nearby towns everyday and teach the children in these schools. Do you remember Tukaram Bhai in the village? His children go to a wonderful school. They not only learn from books in the local language but also do some farming, plant trees and look after them. They think about which trees will help increase the ground water table. They learn how to measure the water table and other things that affect their lives. They learn to live in harmony with the environment around them.



*Children learning to farm, Aadharshila School, Sankad, Madhya Pradesh*

*Children at Aadharshila School, Sankad, Madhya Pradesh*













In 2003, American and Indian scientists found fossilized bones scattered along the Narmada. Scientists identified the bones as belonging to a stocky, carnivorous dinosaur with an unusual head crest. It was named *Rajasaurus narmadensis* which means 'regal lizard from the Narmada'

*Trucks loading sand from the banks of the Narmada*

I know all this is changing now. The forests are getting depleted and industries are coming up. People exploit the river in various ways to make money. The urban and industrial influence is visible particularly in the plains. Sand that sustains riverbeds, river banks, greenery and coastal beaches containing rare minerals, is a precious natural resource that is very important for human survival. The people who work on sand mining sites have to work very hard and usually do this because they are poor and need money to survive.

*Badwani is a city on the left bank of the Narmada in Madhya Pradesh*



*Sand mining, Pathrad, Madhya Pradesh*

There are many places along the Narmada where people mine sand.

Sand mining is very bad for both the river and the sea. It has destructive impact on the river. It depletes the ground water table that can lead to desertification. It has affected the stability of riverbanks, leading to loss of whole chunks of land and making large areas flood prone."

*A boat's anchor on the river bank*













*Stop misuse of the river*

“What will happen, Daadi, if people keep exploiting rivers like this?” I asked. All this worried me. I felt really bad that I had not even seen the river – what if it vanishes before I see it?

“It’s not that people do not do anything about it, beta!” said Daadi. “People protest in many ways and express their anger and concern to protect the river. The Narmada Bachao Andolan started more than twenty years ago to protest against a big dam that was going to displace many villagers and submerge their villages. Even now, the fight continues and people from all over the world support it in many different ways. We should also use water carefully and learn more about water and its conservation,” said Daadi.

*Villagers meet to discuss ways to protect the Narmada*

Easy ways of saving water :  
 Make sure there are no leaking taps at home— if any, call the plumber!  
 Don’t let the tap run while brushing your teeth, doing dishes or washing clothes.  
 Recycle! Water used for washing vegetables and fruits can be used to water plants. Use only as much as you need.





*Bharuch, Gujarat*



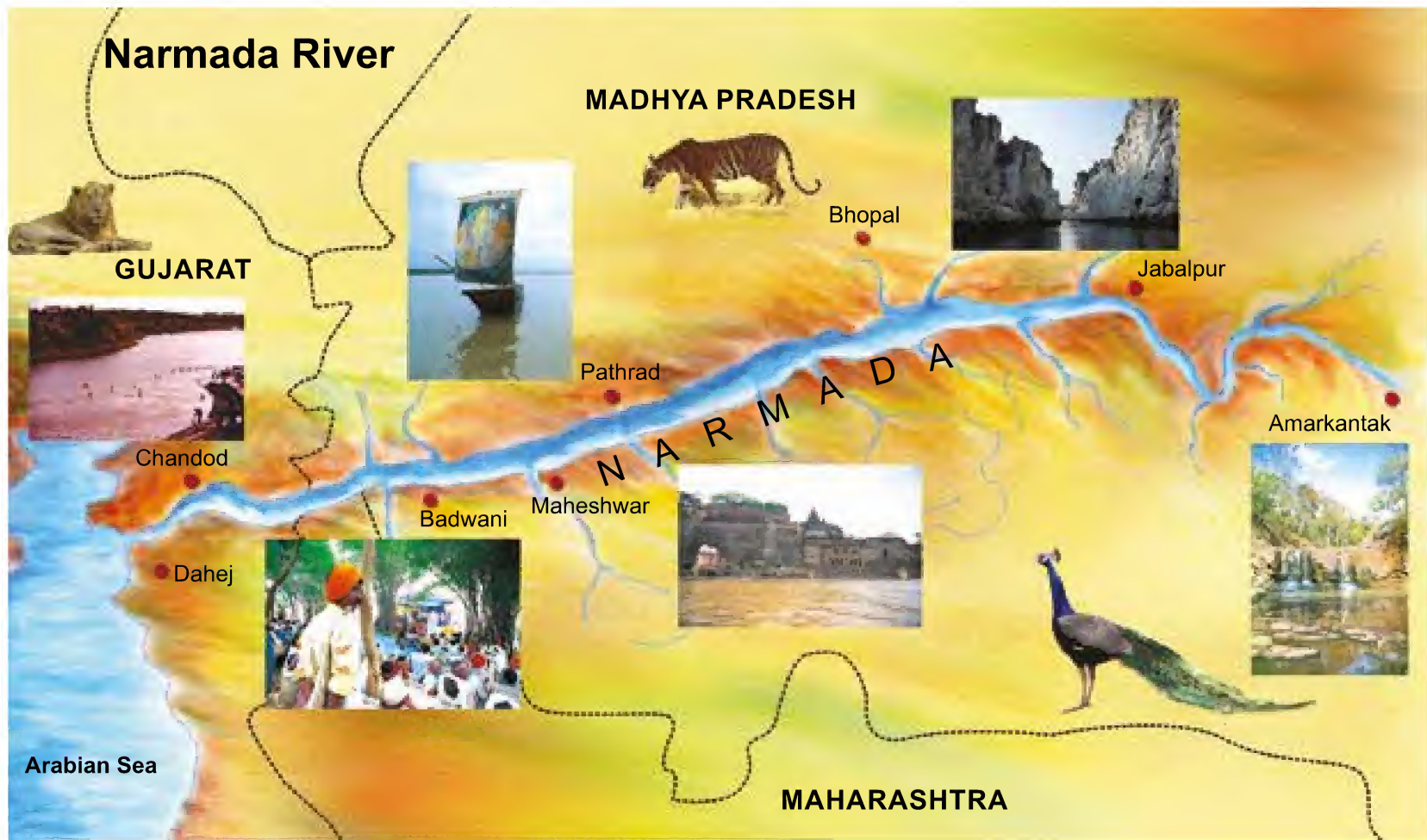
People in tribal MP along the river actually refer to the days of the week by the names of the local market or Haat. So Friday is Valpuria (Valpur Haat), Saturday is Umriliya (Umrili Haat) and Monday is Rajpuria (Alirajpur Haat)!

I couldn't hold back my admiration for Daadi. "How wonderful! Now, I definitely want to go and see the river soon. You know Daadi, I didn't quite realize that so many people's lives are connected to the river and that they have such a close relationship with it. I just thought that the river is there and it gets used by all kinds of people."

"Daadi, I'm hungry now!" Aadi whined. He is such a baby. But it was quite late and past our dinner time. Well, I had a feeling I was going to have good dreams tonight of jumping into the river, swimming and sailing in it! And during our next vacation, I shall ask Baba and Amma to take us on a Parikrama!







#### Narmada Fact Sheet

- Location: Central India, forms the traditional boundary between North and South India
- Direction of flow: East to West (one of only three such rivers in India, the other two are Tapti and Mahi)
- Length of the river: 1,289 Kms
- Place of origin: Amarkantak
- Flows through: Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat
- Major towns and cities along the river:  
Jabalpur, Badwani, Hoshangabad, Omkareshwar and Maheshwar in Madhya Pradesh,  
Bharuch and Dahej in Gujarat
- Meets the Arabian Sea at Dahej, district Bharuch, Gujarat



*Amarkantak in the Maikal Ranges, Madhya Pradesh*





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Vidya Shah is a performing musician based in New Delhi. She combines her deep understanding of culture and music with advocacy and social change. As a rights activist she has been working on issues of gender and sexual health for the last 15 years. She writes across a range of themes such as culture, travel and human rights and is the author of *My Body is Not Mine: Stories of Violence and Tales of Hope*. This is her first book for children.



Parthiv Shah is an alumnus of the National Institute of Design, India, a visiting scholar at the SOAS, London University and at the University of California, Davis. He is a photographer, film maker and a graphic designer. He is the Founder-Director of Centre for Media and Alternative Communication (CMAC). Parthiv has been travelling and photographing the Narmada for the last five years.

An evocative visual journey down the Narmada and through the heart of Central India. Myths and facts combine to capture the essence of life along this beautiful river. Join Aadi and Avani as they learn about the special bond that exists between the Narmada and the people who have lived on her banks since centuries.

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